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Amtrak still hopeful for service on FEC tracks

By Angel Streeter

A long-sought effort to get Amtrak onto the Florida East Coast Railway is sidelined for now.

Long before Florida East Coast Industries announced its new passenger service between Miami and Orlando, the Florida Department of Transportation had been working with Amtrak to revive passenger service on the FEC.

It even set aside \$118 million to help pay for infrastructure costs so Amtrak could provide long-distance passenger service between Miami and Jacksonville. The state transportation money was supposed to attract federal money for the project.

But federal funding never became available, and while the state money is still set aside, not all of it will go to this project, said Fred Wise, director of FDOT's Florida Rail Enterprise.

The money would have helped pay for infrastructure improvements between West Palm Beach and Jacksonville, including new stations along the coast in Daytona Beach, St. Augustine, Titusville, Vero Beach, Cocoa, Melbourne and Fort Pierce.

FDOT, Amtrak and the FEC are still in discussions, Wise said. But they're just in the beginning process of discussing costs and how to share them.

"We have a lot of work to do," Wise said.

Currently, Amtrak service between Miami and Jacksonville runs on CSX Transportation tracks that parallel Interstate 95. But that trip takes about 10 hours, because CSX tracks veer into central Florida and then through Orlando. A direct route on the FEC would shorten that trip to six hours.

This Amtrak-FEC proposed line is separate from All Aboard Florida, the passenger service being established between Miami and Orlando by Florida East Coast Industries. It's investing \$1 billion to run 16 to 19 trains a day each way. All Aboard Florida includes double-tracking much of the FEC railroad in South Florida and building new stations.

Ledoux said All Aboard Florida would not preclude Amtrak from providing its own passenger service on the FEC.

Christina Deeds, Amtrak's media relations manager, said via email that Amtrak considers Florida an important market.

"We recognize the market potential and desire for passenger rail service among Florida east coast communities," the email statement said. "Amtrak has provided state transportation officials a proposed plan that would provide this service. We continue to work with the state on finalizing details of the plan, and look forward to a joint announcement."

Wise said the state did not have any specific plans from Amtrak. Bob Ledoux, Florida East Coast Railway vice president, also said the railroad has not received any plans from Amtrak.

The proposed Amtrak service was looking at only one round trip a day on the FEC. FDOT, partnering with Amtrak, applied twice for federal grants for the project, but was turned down each time.

Palm Beach County transportation officials have been eager to see the Amtrak project move forward, particularly because it would require a connector be built between the CSX and FEC railroads just north of West Palm Beach.

The connector would open the door for Tri-Rail's long-awaited northward expansion to Jupiter along the FEC tracks. The commuter line now ends in Mangonia Park, just north of West Palm Beach.

"We're still hoping it will happen," said Randy Whitfield, the Palm Beach County Metropolitan Planning Organization's executive director. "We're still strongly in support of starting that service."

Kim Delaney, strategic development coordinator with the Treasure Coast Planning Council who has worked with state officials on the Amtrak-FEC project, said Amtrak in the past has looked favorably on the expansion. The cities that would have new stations and stops in their towns also have embraced the project.

"It opens up a potentially new market for Amtrak," she said.

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